

us today because I believe the welfare system in this country is broken and needs to be fixed.

The welfare system serves no one well—not recipients and not taxpayers. We need to preserve a safety net for those who truly need help, but that safety net should be one that encourages work, facilitates self-reliance, and doesn't punish innocent kids.

The legislation before us is not perfect, and I have concerns about many aspects of the bill.

Despite my reservations, this bill permits us to move the welfare reform process forward. This bill requires recipients to work after receiving welfare for 2 years, and set a 5-year limit on total assistance. It permits recipients to use some of their time on assistance to get the education and training they need to find and keep a job. It provides child care for welfare recipients who want to work. It places a priority on preventing teen pregnancies. And it requires absent fathers to help pay for the costs of raising their children.

And we have made some important improvements since this bill was introduced. We increased the requirement that States continue to make their own contributions to maintaining a strong safety net. We strengthened provisions to guarantee that the Food Stamp Program will provide assistance when people need it most. And we restored money for the summer food program for kids.

I will support this legislation despite my reservations, and advance the bill to conference with the hope that it will be further improved in conference. If the final bill does not maintain a strong safety net for children, I will not support it.

Ms. MIKULSKI. Mr. President, I was ready to vote for a welfare reform bill today. I believe we need welfare reform. I have fought for a tough welfare reform bill, and I have voted for welfare reform.

It is deeply disappointing to me that I must vote against final passage of this bill.

I voted for the bill which the Senate passed last year. I hoped at that time that the conference on that bill would make even further improvements in the bill, and that we would be able to send a good bill to the President for his signature.

I was disappointed when the conferees last year took an acceptable bill and turned it into an unacceptable and punitive one. Welfare reform was within our grasp last year. But we let it slip away by placing political considerations ahead of sound policy decisions. I hope we will not make the same mistake this year.

I have not only voted for welfare reform, but I am one of the coauthors of the work first bill, which would have ended welfare as we know it. Along with my coauthors, the Democratic leader, Senator DASCHLE and Senator BREAUX, I am proud that we crafted a plan that is tough on work but not tough on children.

Our plan called for a time-limited and conditional entitlement. It would have required all able-bodied adults to go to work. Our plan provided people with the tools to move from welfare to work; tools like job training, job search assistance, and most importantly, child care.

We recognized that the No. 1 barrier to work is the lack of affordable child care. So our bill provided sufficient funds to ensure that child care would be available to families as parents moved into the work force.

The work first bill also protected children. We made sure that our reform was targeted at adults not at children. We included provisions to ensure that no child would go hungry or go without needed health care because a parent had failed to find and keep a job.

So let me be clear. I support welfare reform. Throughout this Congress, I have fought for welfare reform. I have coauthored not one, but two, major welfare initiatives. And I had hoped to be able to vote for a welfare reform bill today.

Unfortunately, I cannot vote for this bill. This bill does not provide adequate protection for children. What will happen to children once their parents reach the time limit for benefits? Without vouchers to ensure that the basic subsistence needs of children are met, we know that children will suffer if their parents have not found jobs. We simply cannot punish children for the shortcomings of their parents.

Although we adopted a good amendment today to prevent the Food Stamp Program from becoming a block grant, this bill still contains deep cuts in food stamps. Families who depend on the Food Stamp Program to meet their basic nutritional needs will suffer from the cuts in this bill. Even families with full-time workers sometimes need food stamps because their full-time jobs don't provide enough money to feed their families. This bill will hurt them too.

This bill does not provide enough money for child care. In fact, it is likely that States will be unable to meet the work requirements of the bill because of the inadequate level of child care funding. Parents who are ready to work and who want to work will not be able to work if there is not child care which is both affordable and available.

These holes in the safety net for children are of deep concern to me. If protecting children is a priority for this Congress, how can we take a chance on a bill which is sure to hurt innocent children. We cannot.

Mr. President, I have not given up on welfare reform. While I cannot vote "yes" for this bill today, I hope that the conference on the bill will continue to build on the progress we have made on this issue. Unlike last year's conference, which took an adequate bill and made it unacceptable, I hope that this year's conference will make a good, strong bill out of this unacceptable bill.

I urge the conferees on the bill to continue to work with the White House and with the best minds from both parties to reach agreement on a plan we can all support, and that the President will sign. We can do it. We can have a plan that saves lives, saves tax dollars, creates opportunities for work, and protects children.

I hope the conferees will negotiate in good faith to achieve a plan that is tough on work and protects kids. I would be proud to vote for that plan.

PROTECT CHILDREN

Mr. KERRY. Mr. President, there is nothing more important to this debate today than constantly reminding ourselves that our focus ought to be this Nation's children and their well-being. That was the focus when, under Franklin Roosevelt's leadership over 60 years ago, title IV-A of the Social Security Act was originally enacted. As we proceed in this debate about children—and it is a debate about children because over two-thirds of current welfare recipients indeed are children—their interests should be uppermost in our minds.

There is no disagreement that I can find in this Chamber, and very, very little across the Nation, that our welfare system needs reform. Despite what on the part of many who have been involved in legislating, implementing, and administering the existing welfare program is good faith and intentions, that welfare system has been buffeted by the forces of society and culture; for far too many it offers little real help or incentives for movement toward self-sufficiency. Instead, for far too many, it has become at best an indifferent means of providing a bare subsistence income.

In many ways, our world and our Nation are very different places than when the original Federal welfare program was established in the thirties. The objective, Mr. President, ought to be the same. But the means must be adjusted. The objective is to prevent human misery, to give Americans, especially children, a helping hand when they otherwise face destitution and poverty. A handout may once have functioned with considerable effectiveness to help those in poverty toward that objective. Now we understand the importance of child care, training, work search assistance, health care, and other ingredients if families are to move toward self-sufficiency.

We know that 15.3 million children in this Nation live in poverty. This means that 21.8 percent of our children—over one in five children—are impoverished. In Massachusetts, there are more than 176,000 in this category. Despite the stereotypes, Mr. President, the majority of America's poor children are white—9.3 million—and live in rural or suburban areas—8.4 million—rather than in central cities where 6.9 million of them reside.

The other point on which we can agree, because it is a fact rather than an opinion, is that the child poverty